



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

23 December 2024

Afghanistan

Governance and persecution

Media located outside the country reported on 19.12.24 that a total of twelve private and public-sector media companies (eleven TV stations and one radio station) were closed by the Taliban in 2024. Most recently, on 04.12.24 the TV station Arezo TV was closed and seven employees were arrested (cf. BN of 09.12.24).

It was reported on 18.12.24 that the Taliban's secret service had arrested a former soldier of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) in Panjshir province. The individual concerned initially fled to Iran after the Taliban seized power, but had recently returned.

It has been reported in the media that a former bodyguard of ex-president Ghani from Panjshir province, Rahmdel Hanafi, took his own life after the Taliban had arrested his wife and taken her to an unknown location because they were unable to apprehend him. Hanafi initially fled to Iran after the Taliban seized power, but subsequently returned after receiving guarantees from the Taliban.

Two young women are reported to have taken their own lives in Faryab and Takhar provinces respectively, either for family-related reasons or in order to escape forced marriages. The suicide rate among young women has risen sharply since the Taliban came to power – in 2023, a total of 103 women in 28 provinces took their own lives.¹

Burkina Faso / Mali / Niger

Withdrawal from ECOWAS

At a summit in the Nigerian capital Abuja, the heads of state and government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced on 15.12.24 that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, all of which countries are ruled by military juntas, would be withdrawing from the organisation as of 29.01.25 and that they would be granted a six-month transition period during which they could rejoin the community. The military juntas of the three countries rejected ECOWAS's call for the restoration of democratic government and announced in January 2024 that they intended to leave ECOWAS. The transition period is reported in the media as being a final attempt to dissuade Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from permanently leaving the community. The military regimes stated on 13.12.24 that their planned withdrawal from ECOWAS would not be reversible. In 1975, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were founding members of the community, with the aim of improving economic and political integration in West Africa. In September 2023 Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali formed the Alliance of Sahel States. Citizens of the ECOWAS sites are able to travel throughout all member states without a visa. The Alliance of Sahel States wishes to retain this arrangement despite leaving ECOWAS.²

Colombia

Bill to abolish child marriage passed

Congress passed a bill to abolish child marriage on 14.11.24. This removes an article in the civil code dating from 1887, under which marriages of over 14 year-olds were allowed with the parents' consent. Girls in indigenous and economically precarious rural regions are particularly vulnerable to child marriage. President Petro's signature is now all that is required for the bill to become law. The bill further provides for the introduction of a national programme to ensure a dignified life for children and adolescents, including a strategy to prevent child marriage and bonds akin to marriage.³

Iran

Energy crisis

In view of the cold weather in many regions, the continuing energy supply crisis in Iran is leading to drastic measures to save energy in some areas. It has been reported in the media that many government institutions, schools, shops and banks remained closed in the week from 16.12. to 22.12.24. Industrial plants were also shut down in many places. According to information from the energy ministry, a total of 13 major power stations were disconnected from the grid on 18.12.24 due to fuel shortages. Prior to this, there had been appeals from the government for the public to lower room temperatures.⁴

Lebanon

Fragile ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel

The ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel has been largely held to date, although both sides are accusing each other of breaches of the agreement.

According to reports in Lebanese media, the Israeli army moved into Bani Hayyan on 18.12.24 and destroyed a number of buildings in the town. It subsequently withdrew from Bani Hayyan on 20.12.24. On the same day, the Lebanese army occupied further positions south of the Litani river in accordance with the terms of the ceasefire.

At least 20 people have died on the Lebanese side in fighting and air strikes since the ceasefire began on 27.11.24. The ceasefire agreement grants Israel the right to take military action, should Hezbollah attempt to rearm and/or build up a presence in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah and Israel are continually accusing each other of breaking the truce.

Lebanese media have reported that three more bodies have been recovered in rescue operations in Beirut. They are allegedly victims of the air strike against Hassan Nasrallah, in which he was killed. An official death toll from the attack is still outstanding, and many people remain missing in Lebanon.⁵

Nigeria

South-west: Man on death row pardoned

On 17.12.24 the governor in the south-western state of Osun pardoned a 31 year-old man who had spent ten years on death row at the Kirikiri high security prison in Lagos. According to reports in the media, he was sentenced to death by hanging in 2014 for various offences, including robbery, which were committed four years previously. He is now expected to be released at the beginning of 2025. His family and human rights groups had reportedly been championing his cause for a long time. His parents recently pleaded for their only child to be pardoned in a podcast interview which attracted much attention. While no executions have been carried out in Nigeria since 2012, over 3,400 people are reportedly on death row at present. According to other reports, the last execution took place in 2016 (cf. BN of 08.01.24).⁶

North-east: Large numbers of Boko Haram members surrender

According to a report from a news agency citing official military information on 12.12.24, a total of 30,426 Boko Haram members and 99,039 of their dependants, including 36,774 women and 62,265 children, surrendered

between 10.07. and 09.12.24. The high number of people laying down their arms is apparently the result of a combination of military operations, dialogue and rehabilitation measures. The precise number of Boko Haram members is not known. The military reports with a degree of regularity on the capitulation of Boko Haram members and their families (cf. BN of 15.01., 04.03. and 29.07.24).⁷

South-east: Armed attackers kill university lecturer

Unknown armed attackers shot dead a university lecturer in Awka, capital of the south-eastern state of Anambra, on 16.12.24. According to reports in the media, the attackers took possession of their victim's vehicle. The police has reportedly initiated murder investigations and asked the public for help in solving the crime.

Acts of violence in the region are commonly blamed on members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a group seeking the secession of south-east Nigeria, and its armed wing, Eastern Security Network (ESN). The group and its armed wing deny such allegations (cf. BN of 30.09.24). Other armed groups are also active in the region, including so-called cultists.⁸

Pakistan

Military courts pass sentence on civilians arrested in the aftermath of the mass protests in May 2023

The media department of the Pakistani armed forces announced on 21.12.24 that 25 persons who had appeared before military courts on charges relating to the mass protests in May 2023 had been sentenced to prison terms of between two and ten years.

On 09.05.23, following the arrest of former Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan in a fraud case, supporters of Khan's Pakistan Tehrik-e Insaf party (PTI) attacked and damaged military facilities, mosques and government buildings in towns and cities all over Pakistan. In reaction to the sentences, PTI wrote on the social network X that the military courts had violated the defendants' constitutional and human rights, adding that the trials were not transparent and that some 80 people had been held in military custody since the mass demonstrations, in violation of their fundamental rights.⁹

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa TTP attack on checkpoint in South Waziristan; security situation

On 21.12.24 fighters of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attacked a checkpoint in the South Waziristan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. According to official information, 16 members of the security forces were killed and eight injured. The TTP has claimed responsibility for the attack, in which it alleges to have killed 35 members of the security forces. No independent verification of the alleged death tolls has been possible. No information has been provided regarding killed militant fighters.

Attacks by the TTP in the north-east Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been continually on the increase since Kabul was recaptured by the Afghan Taliban in August 2021. By its own account, the TTP is aiming to introduce the sharia in Pakistan, too. The attack took place after the elders of Dre Maseed in the Sur Rogha region of South Waziristan had held a gathering on 20.12.24 to draw attention to the danger to civilians posed by counter-terrorism operations by the Pakistani military. In its latest report, the Pakistan Center for Conflict and Security Studies has stated that more than 240 people were killed in "terrorist incidents" in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in November 2024. According to this source, 68 security agents were among those killed; this represents the highest death toll in a single month in 2024.¹⁰

Palestinian territories / Israel

Gaza Strip: Current developments; humanitarian situation

According to information released by the Hamas-run health ministry on 17.12.24, at least 45,059 Palestinians have been killed and 107,041 injured in the Gaza Strip since the war began on 07.10.23. The ministry does not officially differentiate between combatants and civilians. The figures cannot be independently verified. According to information released by the Israeli military on 19.11.24, a total of 386 members of the military have been killed and 2,488 injured since the ground offensives began. It is estimated that around 100 Israeli hostages, dead or alive, are still being held in the Gaza Strip.

As the war continues, the humanitarian situation is deteriorating still further and aid organisations find themselves unable to meet the prevailing needs adequately. The most recent analyses of satellite images indicate that the destruction of the infrastructure is continuing. UNOSAT, the satellite monitoring programme of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, reported on 13.12.24, for example, that approx. 69 % of the buildings in the Gaza Strip have been damaged or destroyed. It further noted that the level of destruction had most recently increased in North Gaza and Rafah in particular. The Education Cluster has also published analysis results, according to which almost 88 % of school buildings in the Gaza Strip have been either directly or indirectly hit or damaged and are in need of repair.¹¹

West Bank: Continuing tensions and armed clashes

In an attempt to take control of the city of Jenin, parts of which are controlled by armed groups, the Palestinian security forces launched a raid on the city on 14.12.24. Armed clashes ensued between the security forces and militias, and were still ongoing on the morning of 23.12.24. One member of the security forces reportedly died in the fighting. No Israeli troops were involved.¹²

Israel: Missiles from Yemen hit greater Tel Aviv region

On the night of 20.12.24, a missile fired from Yemen hit an area of Tel Aviv, injuring 16 people. According to information from the Israeli side, more than 200 missiles have been fired at Israel in the past 14 months. Only a few days before, a missile from Yemen hit a school building in central Israel.¹³

Sudan

US secretary of state announces humanitarian aid

According to reports in the media, US secretary of state Antony Blinken announced at the UN Security Council on 19.12.24 that the USA would be providing US\$ 200 million of humanitarian aid for Sudan. In cooperation with Egypt, the UAE, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, the African Union (AU) and the UN, the USA has reportedly provided medicine, food and shelter for approx. 3.5 million people. In this context, Blinken called on those countries which are supporting the warring parties with arms and profiting from the conflict to bring their influence to bear with the aim of ending the conflict.¹⁴

Syria

Status clarification processes for former SAA and NDF members

According to the new rulers, former members of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and pro-Iranian militias who were organised as part of the National Defence Forces (NDF) are to be given the opportunity to pass through a status clarification process to establish whether the individuals concerned were responsible for crimes under Assad's government and are to face criminal prosecution or whether they are eligible for amnesty.

To this end, former soldiers, officers and medical personnel of the SAA have been called on to report to so-called reconciliation centres, where they are to identify themselves and hand in weapons and other equipment. An international daily newspaper has reported that one of the first such reconciliation centres opened in Latakia on 18.12.24 on the grounds of a former security authority establishment. More than 600 people are said to have appeared on the first day, followed by an even greater number on the following day, for which no precise figure has been stated.

All those reporting to the centre – primarily men, but also including a number of women – were photographed and issued with an identification document which is initially valid for three months. According to a local representative of the interior ministry in Latakia, after three months the individuals concerned must report to a security headquarters in order to continue the process.

Prior to the fall of Assad's government on 08.12.24, a so-called reconciliation centre was set up in HTS-controlled Aleppo on 06.12.24.¹⁵

Former armed opposition groups are to be integrated into the Syrian army

Citing the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Syrian state media reported on 17.12.24 that all armed groups in the country are to be dissolved and their fighters are to be put under the command of the defence ministry. Meanwhile, the new interior ministry has called on people to apply to the country's police academies for posts within the security service.¹⁶

Reports of isolated attacks on Alawites

An international news agency reported on 21.12.24 that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) had documented at least 72 killings of people belonging to various ethnic and religious minorities since the fall of Assad's government on 08.12.24. All of the incidents concerned have reportedly occurred in the religiously diverse governorates of Hama, Homs, Tartus and Latakia.

According to the news agency report, around a dozen Alawites were killed by armed men in the village of Bahra (Hama) between 09.12. and 11.12.24. Six and two people were killed respectively in the neighbouring villages of Mouaa and Um al-Amad. All three villages are now said to be virtually deserted, the villagers having fled to Tartus. In response, the HTS militia reportedly organised a meeting on the weekend of 20.12. and 21.12.24 which was attended by Sunni and Alawite dignitaries from the villages of Rabia, Tizin, Metnine and Mouaa. An end to the violent attacks was agreed at the meeting.¹⁷

Occupied buffer zone: Israel braced for protracted presence in the area

Following the Israeli army's advance into the demilitarised buffer zone along the Golan Heights in the Syrian governorate of Quneitra (cf. BN of 09.12.24) and its occupation of the summit of Mount Hermon, Syria's highest mountain, the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu visited one of the newly established military bases on 17.12.24. He reiterated Israel's intention to maintain a military presence in the buffer zone until an agreement guaranteeing Israel's security was reached with the new rulers in Damascus.

Mount Hermon is less than ten km away from the Golan Heights, which have been occupied by Israel since 1967. In a press statement on 17.12.24, the Israeli defence minister stated that the mountain constituted a strategically important position from which Hezbollah in the Beqaa Valley in neighbouring Lebanon could be observed more effectively. He also stated that the Israeli presence would act as a deterrent for rebels in Damascus who claim to represent a moderate stance but are actually to be seen as part of the most extreme branches of Islamism.

Ahmad al-Shara, leader of the HTS militia, criticised Israel's action, insisting that Syria would abide by the 1974 ceasefire agreement with Israel and pointing out that the danger posed to Israel by pro-Iranian militias had been averted by the overthrow of Assad's government.

On 15.12.24 the Israeli government additionally approved the building of further settlements in the Golan Heights, asserting that the doubling of the Israeli population in the Golan Heights which is being pursued by issuing the building permits will strengthen the region's defendability.

It is estimated that 20,000 Israelis currently live in the Golan Heights, along with 20,000 Syrian nationals. The Syrians living here originate for the most part from Syria's Druze Arab minority. In contrast to the West Bank, which Israel regards as a disputed region, the Golan Heights have been treated as Israeli territory since they were annexed from Syria in 1981.¹⁸

North-east: SNA attacks on Ain al-Arab (Kobanê)

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have reported that they were attacked by fighters of the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) at numerous positions around the city of Ain al-Arab (Kurdish: Kobanê) in Aleppo governorate and along the Euphrates on 18.12.24.

The city is the SDF's last major stronghold in Aleppo governorate between Tal Abyad in the east and Jarabulus and Manbij in the west, all of which are under the control of the SNA and the Turkish military. Ain al-Arab / Kobanê has a majority Kurdish population. The city is of great symbolic significance on account of the hard-fought victory over IS rule in 2016. Following the SNA's capture of Manbij on 11.12.24 (cf. BN of 16.12.24), a temporary ceasefire was agreed for the entire region. Fighting prior to the capture of the city caused thousands of people to flee their homes. On 17.12.24 the SDF leadership committed to a peace plan under which they were to withdraw their fighters from Kobanê in return for the creation of a demilitarised zone under the supervision of the US Army.

According to reports in the media, two journalists were killed in a Turkish drone attack near to the Tishrin Dam, some 60 km south of Ain al-Arab / Kobanê, on 20.12.24. The journalists were working for Kurdish media companies in Türkiye.¹⁹

Türkiye

Arrests and investigations following critical comments after death of Kurdish media representatives in Syria

According to reports in the media, nine people, including seven journalists, were arrested on 22.12.24 after a protest rally in remembrance of the Kurdish media representatives Nazım Daştan and Cihan Bilgin, who died in Syria.

The demonstration's organisers included the journalists' association Dicle Fırat (DFG), which champions the interests of Kurdish media representatives in Türkiye. Five other detained journalists were subsequently released subject to conditions imposed by a court.

According to Turkish media, arrest warrants had been issued for the journalists killed in Syria, on the charge of membership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is classified as a terrorist organisation. The chief public prosecutor's office in Istanbul has launched an investigation into the president of the Istanbul Bar Association, İbrahim Kaboğlu, and members of the association's governing board, over their assertion that targeted attacks on journalists in conflict regions constitute a violation of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention. The chief public prosecutor's office is accusing them of "propaganda for an illegal organisation" and "propagating misleading information in public".²⁰

Ukraine

Civilian casualties

According to information from the regional public prosecutor's office, one person was killed by a Russian drone attack in the Kherson region on 16.12.24. The police have reported that three people died in a missile attack in Kharkiv on 19.12.24. According to the relevant authorities, one person died and several people were injured when a ballistic missile struck the centre of Kyiv on 20.12.24.

Ukrainian authorities reported a similar toll after an attack on Kherson on 20.12.24, which left one person dead and injured a number of people.²¹

Course of the war

Russia claims to have captured the villages of Lozova (Kharkiv oblast, not the city of the same name) and Stari Terny, Trudove, Kostiantynopolske and Sontsivka (Donetsk oblast). The capture of these villages would further heighten the threat of Ukrainian troops becoming encircled in the fighting over the city of Kurakhove (cf. BN of 16.12.24). The Russian army has stated that it has captured a total of 190 Ukrainian villages in 2024.

Without stating any further details, on 22.12.24 the Ukrainian ombudsman accused Russian soldiers of having executed a further five prisoners of war – an accusation which has already been levelled at the Russians a number of times (cf. BN of 07.10.24).

Citing Ukrainian information, it was reported on 20.12.24 that following an evidently long-prepared Russian cyber attack on registers within the justice ministry's jurisdiction, online services such as registering changes of address, births, marriages and vehicles had to be suspended.

In the wake of a drone attack on Kazan, capital of the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, Russian president Vladimir Putin threatened to wreak on Ukraine many times the level of destruction incurred in Kazan. A number of drones hit residential buildings; there were no reports of any casualties. According to a report in the media, Ukraine has not claimed responsibility for the attack.

On the basis of anonymous interviews, a press article focusing on the difficulties in recruiting new Ukrainian soldiers reports that specialists from air defence units are being deployed as foot soldiers at the front on account of the shortage of troops there. The article notes that they lack the necessary training for this role, while at the same time the air defences are losing key personnel on a substantial scale. The article also refers to cases of local commanders transferring personnel to the front as a disciplinary measure.²²

Ukraine / Russian Federation

High-ranking member of the Russian military assassinated in Moscow

A primed e-scooter exploded outside a residential building in Moscow on 17.12.24, killing lieutenant general Igor Kirillov and an adjutant. Kirillov is reported to have headed the Russian army's unit for chemical, biological and radiological weapons. On the day prior to the incident, the Ukrainian secret service (SBU) had issued a warrant for his arrest. The Ukrainian government is reported to have been behind the attack. Russia has been accused numerous times of breaking the ban on the use of chemical weapons in the war against Ukraine (cf. BN of 12.02., 18.03., 22.04. and 06.05.24).

On 18.12.24 the Russian authorities reported that an Uzbek national had been arrested on suspicion of having carried out the assassination and on 19.12.24 it was announced that he had been charged.²³

Civilian deaths in Russia's Kursk region

According to the acting governor of the Kursk region, a Ukrainian missile attack on the town of Rylsk on 20.12.24 killed six people – or, according to more recent information, five people –, including one child. Ukrainian troops advanced into Russia's Kursk region at the beginning of August 2024 (cf. BN of 12.08.24), since when the Russian side has been unable to force them back out of the region, despite the deployment of thousands of North Korean soldiers.²⁴

Venezuela

Demonstrators released, opposition figures arrested

While there have recently been renewed reports of (conditional) releases of persons who were arrested in connection with the presidential elections in 2024, the past few weeks have once again witnessed the arrests of a number of opposition figures. Human rights defenders speak in this connection of a "revolving door" policy being applied as a form of repression, with individuals continually being released while at the same time new arrests take place, thereby exploiting political prisoners as a means of exerting pressure.

The chief public prosecutor's office claims that in total over 730 people have been released from prison from the first releases in November 2024 (cf. BN of 18.11.24) to 20.12.24. The number of releases verified by NGO Foro Penal is markedly lower. In addition, the most recently verified release cases are said to have included many minors. Foro Penal has put the number of political prisoners as per 19.12.24 at 1,877.

According to reports in the media, at least nine political activists were arrested in the two weeks up to 19.12.24 alone, the majority of whom belonged to the opposition party Vente Venezuela. Those arrested included the opposition politician and mayor of Cabimas, Nabil Maalour (Un Nuevo Tiempo), who was arrested on 10.12.24, according to interior minister Cabello on charges including administrative corruption, and Jesús Armas (Primero Justicia), also a politician (former city councillor) and director of the NGO Ciudadanía Sin Límites, who was also arrested in Caracas. According to members of Armas' family, his arrest could be linked to a critical tweet which he posted in which he responded to the cancellation of a concert by a popular band by describing Venezuela as a dictatorship in which there was no space for any divergent views even in the cultural sphere. Armas' relatives have also pointed out that around one week before his arrest he was spotlighted and criticised in interior minister Cabello's television programme (Con el mazo dando). A report published by Amnesty International (AI) at the beginning of 2022 apparently reveals previous similar cases in which individuals have been stigmatised and smeared and later arrested either arbitrarily or for political reasons (cf. BN of 28.02.22).

On 08.12.24 a non-commissioned officer of the Argentine Gendarmerie on a private visit to relatives in the state of Táchira was arrested directly upon entering the country from Colombia. He is accused of spying. A local employee of the Argentinian embassy in Caracas is also reported to have been arrested. The Argentinian government has described the arrest of the member of its military as arbitrary and called publicly for the detained men to be released.

On 12.12.24 the NGO HRW called on the the Venezuelan government to disclose the whereabouts of Sofía María Sahagún Ortiz, who holds dual Spanish and Venezuelan nationality and has been missing since 23.10.24. Sahagún was intending to fly to Madrid on 23.10.24, but did not board the plane. It is not known whether she has been

arrested and where she currently is. Sahagún's husband and their children left the country a number of days later after being subjected to increasing intimidation by the police.²⁵

Two more deaths in custody; prison conditions

Two people have died in the space of 72 hours at Tocuyito prison in the state of Carabobo. Media reports and NGOs accuse the authorities of having denied the prisoners adequate and timely medical care, and are calling for independent investigations into the deaths. The two individuals concerned are believed to have been detained on political grounds,

Back in mid-November 2024, Jesús Manuel Martínez, a political activist from the opposition party Vente Venezuela and electoral witness, who was imprisoned at Puente Ayala prison in Barcelona, Anzoátegui, died in hospital following complications resulting from an underlying diabetes condition which had rapidly deteriorated in prison. The chief public prosecutor's office has rejected accusations from Martínez's family and members of the opposition that he did not receive the necessary, adequate medical care and was only attended to when it was too late (cf. BN of 25.11.24).

Various actors have repeatedly drawn attention to the precarious prison conditions and violence against inmates, as well as sexualised violence against female visitors (cf. BN of 04.11.24). The civil-society Venezuelan Observatory for Prisons (OVP) most recently highlighted the examination of mobile telephones and body checks carried out on women while they were nude and reported on political prisoners being threatened with bans on receiving visitors and intimidation of their family members.

In a report which appeared on 28.11.24, AI presented identified individual cases confirming the mistreatment and suspected torture of imprisoned minors, and called for the 69 people who were arrested in the aftermath of the presidential elections and who were still in prison at the time to be released.²⁶

Yemen

Conflict with the Houthis

An Israeli military spokesman announced on 19.12.24 that the Israeli army had attacked targets in Yemen in response to Houthi attacks, in the course of which a school was hit in Israel.

The Israeli attacks reportedly covered Red Sea ports and the energy infrastructure in Sanaa, which is controlled by the Houthis. According to information from the Houthi-controlled broadcasting station Al-Masirah, nine people died in the Israeli attacks. On 22.12.24 the US military stated that it had carried out attacks on positions in Yemen in the wake of Houthi attacks on the Tel Aviv region in which a number of people were injured. It appears that the US military mistakenly fired at one of its own combat aircraft in the course of its attack. Since the beginning of the war in Gaza in October 2023, the Houthis have been attacking Israel and merchant ships in the Gulf of Aden with drones and rockets. The Houthis claim that these measures are intended to show their solidarity with the Palestinians.²⁷

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